

Elitism and egalitarianism

As a collective group, scientists would probably vote slightly left of the centre, be more liberal in their political and social views and would be genuinely concerned about inequalities in society. Scientists rarely use the word 'elite' without some apologetic justification, yet we constantly speak about selection through excellence—and hence exclusion of a non-elite—without any blushes. Although we do not stress the fact, scientists are a special group (elite?), having gone through years of relentless training and harsh selection until we are sufficiently trusted to train others, set our own research agendas or even manage research funds. Higher up the research hierarchy, the national and international leaders in science are not randomly selected either. They are usually among the top at their primary job of research and have other management and communication skills that clearly set them apart. They are an elite even if we do not dare to utter the word.

Similarly, research institutes also have their 'pecking order'. As the stock exchange defines a ladder of the best performing companies, so too does the analysis of research performance as measured by citations of published papers or grants awarded to staff. Unfortunately, we cannot take this analogy too far. The stock market is a dynamic and sensitive arbiter of the quality of companies—a series of bad quarterly returns and the world knows that a 'mighty' is falling. The reputations of universities or research institutes, however, can survive at some pre-ordained level for decades by a combination of good marketing and, in particular, a lack of up-to-date comparative, quantitative and qualitative data. We do not have our 'accounting' in place, and we cannot force institutions to provide standardized annual data for different research parameters, which would allow us, and particularly newcomers to research, to follow trends and identify upcoming institutes. Such a regular analysis would surely help to 'name' winner and loser institutes and avoid complacency.

Perhaps this lack of factual analysis of institutes points to a fear of identifying an elite? Each reader of this editorial will recognize wonderful aspects of his or her institute but also some mediocrities in the neighbourhood. The intensive assessment exercise that has been ongoing in the UK has certainly led to a gradient of funding based on a perceived quality of research departments with consequences for recruitment or retention of staff. In this way, the prophesy of poor performance will fulfil itself. But it is important to get the analysis right. An inadequate ranking system would miss a small oasis of excellent research in a desert of mediocrity and ultimately that activity would dry up due to a lack of support.

When it comes to funding individual research projects, the question of how to balance elitism and egalitarianism becomes even more vexed. I have never heard a scientist argue that the best proposals should not be supported. That sentence could have ended "...supported as a priority" to introduce the slight ambiguity of our attitude towards excellence. Most, if not all, scientists will instantly agree with statements such as "support of poor research is like supporting bad theatre". Clearly, there is an inevitable cost to support any research group. But if they are focused on work that, even if successful, will not advance our understanding of a problem, it is a cost with little benefit. Unfortunately, if that research is wrapped up in arguments of its relevance to society, it will nevertheless receive a warm welcome—and financial support—from some selection committees. But relevance to society cannot come from mediocre, 'me-too' Johnny-come-lately research. I should stress that some of the best and innovative research comes from projects that address societal requirements. Also, if research is of the right quality, there is a very good chance that it can be translated into something beneficial, which should add to its ranking for financial support.

So, there are strong arguments for a rigid adherence to quality in selecting research projects, individuals and institutes, no matter if it is for basic or for applied research. But there is an obvious downside to this, which comes back to the question of how we define society. If, effectively, 80% of the potential projects are excluded from funding, is this desirable? If this cohort is concentrated in, say, peripheral Europe, some central states in the USA or the majority of South American, African and Asian countries, is it wise to tell them that they should forget research and restrict themselves to classroom transmission of often out-of-date information from textbooks? That seems to me a bad long-term strategy. Our increasingly technological and knowledge-based society needs a growing number of skilled professionals, and we therefore need to support as much science and as many scientists as possible. But simply dividing funds between all laboratories is clearly nonsense as well. Those that are most likely to make a difference would get inadequate resources, while those with more modest potential would receive too much.

The solution could be the creation of two schemes: one with clear criteria for the unambiguous selection of the most excellent proposals and another to support and promote a broader college of scientists. In the former scheme, only research at the edge of our comfort zone of knowledge should be supported with the required levels of funds. The second programme should put greater emphasis on the training benefit that would arise from the project, and the funds could be tailored accordingly. In this way, our dual aspirations for excellence/elitism and fairness/inclusion can both be accommodated, which would also meet society's needs for innovative discovery and a skilled work force.

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